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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the conception of functional literacy advanced by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a 29-member organization of leading industrialized countries, as part of its 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). The paper suggests that embedded within this conception of literacy and the discourse from which it evolves is an entire economic agenda. It notes that the IALS study developed a scale of literacy performance to allow comparisons of literacy between people within a wide range of abilities and across cultures and languages. According to the paper, OECD's perspective is that literacy's primary function is to satisfy the human resource demands of the global corporate community. The paper contends that OECD's conception of literacy is divided into three distinct strands: prose, document, and quantitative, and that within those strands, the learner's function is to extract the information contained in text and apply it in a specific, predetermined manner. The paper argues that it is misguided to believe that language is a neutral medium to convey objective ideas--for example, although the prevailing corporate discourse presents the free market system as a force of nature similar to the law of gravity, an economic system constructed to empower some individuals over others is not the same as an inexorable natural law. The paper concludes that like other educational concepts, models of literacy instruction contain social theories or models of social order, social power, and social change. (NKA)

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The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development: Functional Literacy and Corporate Agendas

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Introduction

Conceptions of literacy are circumscribed by the ideological dispositions of those who employ them, profit by them and enforce them as a condition of economic development. Functional literacy entails an entire social perspective, a theory of economics and promotes a view on the relationship between employers and workers. Because the goal of functional literacy instruction is to train rather than educate, the role of the learner is limited to conforming and adapting to existing social circumstances. In the training model of literacy instruction, learners are limited to reading the word rather than the world from which it emerges. This paper examines the conception of functional literacy advanced by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as part of its 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). It suggests that embedded within this conception of literacy and the discourse from which it evolves is an entire economic agenda.

The OECD and the IALS

In 1994 the OECD, a publicly funded organization sponsored by twenty-nine leading industrialized countries, conducted the first International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). The objective of this survey was to determine adult literacy levels among seven member countries. The study developed a scale of literacy performance to allow comparisons of literacy between people within a wide range of abilities, and across cultures and languages. The OECD's explanation for carrying out the IALS reflects its narrow view on literacy

education. From its perspective, literacy's primary function is to satisfy the human resource demands of the global corporate community.[1]

> The emerging global economy is characterized by greatly increased flows of information and financial capital. The best way to exploit the new economic environment is to strengthen the capacity of firms and labour markets to adjust to change, improve their productivity and capitalize on innovation. But this capacity depends first and foremost on the knowledge and skills of the population. IALS shows that the literacy skills of individual citizens are a powerful determinant of a country's innovative and adaptive capacity.

By its own admission, the OECD's principal interest in literacy education is to enhance transnational corporate access to the information processing skills that functional literacy provides. As part of the transnational corporate agenda, the existence of a skilled labour pool allows corporations to relocate, exploiting cheap sources of labour in the new economic environment referred to by the OECD.

The IALS was carried out in response to the high correlation between a nation's literacy levels and its economic performance. According to Willms and Sloat, "governments around the globe are concerned about the literacy abilities of their citizens in light of the strong correlation between literacy and economic performance."[2] As part of its investigation into literacy levels among member countries, the OECD developed a definition of literacy

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[1] *Background Information on the International Adult Literacy Survey*, (Paris: OECD, 1996), p.3.

[2] Elizabeth Sloat and Doug Willms, "Influences of the Development of Literacy in Young Adults: A Review of the Literature", (Unpublished, March 28, 1996), p.1.

that meets the objectives of its transnational corporate agenda, but fails to reflect many important elements in contemporary literacy education: "A mode of adult behaviour, namely; using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential."[3] The reference to "developing one's knowledge and potential" presents a somewhat ambiguous defintion. But, in conjunct with the IALS's definition of literacy strands and its assessment protocols, the OECD's conception of literacy becomes abundantly clear.

The OECD's conception of literacy is divided into three distinct strands: prose; document; and quantitative. All three strands involve the simple utilization of printed information from various popular sources:[4]

> . . . prose literacy required participants to read, understand, and use information from written texts such as stories and editorials. Document literacy required readers to locate and use information from texts such as job applications, transportation schedules, and maps. Quantitative literacy required the ability to find, understand, and use mathematical operations embedded in texts - weather charts found in the newspaper, or calculating interest on a loan.

Within all three strands of literacy, the learner's function is to extract the information contained in text and apply it a specific, predetermined manner. Level one in prose literacy, for example, required the ability to locate one item of information in the text identical to the

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[3]*Literacy, Economy, & Society: Results of the First International Adult Literacy Survey.* Statistics Canada. Ottawa: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development & the Canadian Minister of Industry, 1995, p. 14.

[4]Sloat and Willms, p.3.

information provided in the instructions. In level three, the reader must identify several pieces of information located in several different paragraphs. Level one quantitative literacy asks simple arithmetic questions that do not require borrowing. In level three, the operations are more complex as multiplication and divisional skills are needed to complete some tasks.

Although the complexity of skills required to perform the various tasks increases from one level to the next, the epistemic message remains the same. Indeed, regardless of the level, the three IALS strands reveal a narrow view of both literacy and knowledge. Even the highest literacy requirements in the three IALS strands reveal a regressive understanding of literacy. In prose literacy, for example, attaining level five requires the following skills: "Some tasks at this level require the reader to search for information in dense text that contains a number of plausible distracters. Some tasks require readers to make high level inferences or use specialized knowledge."[5] Even in the case of "high-level" inferences or "specialized knowledge", the assessment procedures privilege provided information over textual interpretation or analysis. According to this view, knowledge is embedded in text, and it is the responsibility of the reader to discover and assimilate the "facts".

In prose literacy, where readers should be encouraged to analyze the text from a personal perspective, even level five provides no such opportunity. The testing protocols

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[5]Irwin S. Kirsch, "Literacy performance on three scales: definitions and results", In *Literacy, Economy and Society,Literacy, Economy, & Society: Results of the First International Adult Literacy Survey*. Statistics Canada. Ottawa: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development & the Canadian Minister of Industry, 1995, p.27.

require the reader to search for and locate information, rather than analyzing, or even reflecting on, textual content. The other two testing strands, document and quantitative, clearly measure the kinds of skills required in low level occupations. Such skills as entering personal information on an application form, and searching through various information on a business document are basic functional literacy skills. By implicitly validating market economy practices, these examples also carry ideological messages that systematically indoctrinate individuals with a market economy world view.

The IALS's functional literacy objectives are also revealed in the OECD's own admission of the kinds of skills the study was designed to measure.[6]

> The literacy levels not only provide a means for exploring the progression of information-processing demands across each of the scales, but they also can be used to help explain how the proficiencies individuals demonstrate reflect the likelihood they will respond correctly to the broad range of tasks used in this assessment as well as similar tasks that were not included.

The survey's interest is in measuring the "information processing" skills required by corporations in the information age. The emphasis on testing information-processing skills reflects the shift from the human resource requirements of the industrial age to those of the Information Age.

There are important elements in literacy education that the OECD's conception of literacy fails to consider. By stimulating creativity and freeing the imagination, literacy can provide a vehicle for intellectual enhancement as well as material improvement. Perhaps

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[6]Ibid, p.49

even more importantly, literacy is a potential mechanism for individual empowerment and social reconstruction. To protect the status-quo, functional literacy dehydrates the imaginative capacity of learners to limit alternative visions of self and society. It presents the current socio-economic framework as if it was the inevitable result of naturally occurring forces. Within this context, there is only one discourse considered credible; the one perpetuating the social status-quo.

The Epistemological Impact of Functional Literacy

Instead of learners dialectically engaging the world they encounter, functional literacy domesticates them into passively following external instructions and directions. As Lankshear points out, "there is no suggestion here of leading, commanding, mastering or controlling"[7] on behalf of the individual. Limited to functional literacy education, learners become estranged from the world of decisions on social policies, and economic development plans. When individuals are the recipients of knowledge -- the objects as opposed to subjects of the learning process -- then they merely utilize the information provided. Even more damaging, they are habituated to learn that decisions are made by others, and their role is simply to follow instructions dictated to them.

It is misguided to believe that language is a neutral medium to convey objective ideas

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[7]Colin Lankshear, "Functional Literacy From a Freirean Point of View", *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter*, Ed. Peter McLaren & Peter Leonard, (London: Routledge, 1993), p.91.

with linguistic lables that comport with objective reality. In critical literacy, for example, the dominant corporate discourse is viewed as a culturally artifact that shapes the subject's world view. The prevailing corporate discourse presents the free market system as a force of nature similar to the law of gravity. There is the law of supply and demand, marketing and consumption; there is an acceptable employment level and an acceptable inflation level. Obviously, an economic system constructed to empower some individuals over others is not the same as an inexorable natural law. Unlike the force of gravity, a free-market system that precludes social justice is not ahistorical, but rather is perpetuated through social power and discourse.

Conclusion

Given our modern understanding of language, literary practices cannot be viewed in isolation from the various social forces that lead to individual or group marginalization. In fact, discourse practices are a central means by which social inequality is maintained. Functional literacy education perpetuates existing social relations by preparing learners to fill information processing jobs within the current free market framework. It promotes the status-quo by limiting the opportunity for economically disadvantaged learners to increase their understanding of the world by understanding the contextual nature of language.

Like other educational concepts, models of literacy instruction contain social theories or models of social order, social power and social change. They promote theories of

worker/employer and class relations, and indicate how workers should think and behave within the free market context. The prevailing free market discourse favouring functional literacy marginalizes counter discourses while validating its own by excluding other world views. Within the context of global economic development, there is an emerging demand for workers possessing information processing skills. But this demand should not prevent workers from appreciating their importance in the existing social order, or recognizing their right to change that order if they so desire. An alternative form of literacy that exposes the free market system as a discourse sustained hegemony, rather than a force of nature, may be of social and moral value to the entire global community.

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